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Obedience to law or to Scripture?

Phyllis Zagano | Apr. 11, 2012 Just Catholic

Now it's Vienna's Cardinal Christoph Schönborn who's wading in hot water. Seems he and a group of Austrian priests and deacons got a full blast of papal steam on Holy Thursday.

The shrill Roman whistle sounded: No women or married men will be ordained.

Goodness, what's a 67-year-old prince of the church (and son of a count) to do? After all, Schönborn was a student of Joseph Ratzinger in Regensburg, Germany. He taught dogmatic theology at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. He was a member of the International Theological Commission. He oversaw the creation of the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Now Schönborn's former professor, the pope, chastised the Austrians (not directly, of course) in the middle of Holy Thursday. Benedict also sent a letter to Schönborn. Do you think it might be about women?

Schönborn has tangled with Benedict before. In 2009, as the Austrian bishops were ending emergency meetings called by the pope, the cardinal handed Benedict XVI a petition. Called an "initiative of the faithful," it asked for married priests (both men to be ordained and those who left to marry) and for ordination of women as deacons. Since then, the Austrian Priest's Initiative, representing 15 percent of Austrian clergy, broadened the demands. And, by the way, 87,000 Austrian Catholics have formally resigned from the church.

The Pfarrer Initiative, as it is also called, goes far beyond Schönborn's earlier requests, but Austria has been simmering with reform ideas for a long time as Rome watched. In 2001, three Vatican offices directed a terse four paragraph "Notification" (a document roughly on the level of parking regulations) at the Austrian bishops, telling them not to train women as deacons. The Vatican's argument: We do not want to ordain them. One of the Curia's signers was Joseph Ratzinger.

Now the rapidly aging pope -- he cannot walk the length of St. Peter's Basilica, and his brother doesn't think he should travel anymore -- appears to be upping the ante. Benedict spoke not only about women as priests on Holy Thursday. He spoke quite plainly about the law against "women's ordination," period. That was *Frauenordination*. That was *l'ordinazione delle donne*.

Does it matter? Well, if you are a friend of the long Tradition (East and West) of women ordained as deacons, and if you see the restoration of that Tradition in the Roman Catholic Church as a way to allow women to preach at liturgy within the law, you'll wonder if Benedict has forgotten a few things. He is, after all, a historical theologian.

And notice here that Benedict lumps his predecessor's statement against women as priests along with opinions of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, calling them all "definitive decisions of the Church's Magisterium." Any basic ecclesiology textbook will indicate that's a bit of a stretch.

This is not going away, and it is leading toward what Benedict seems to envision: a smaller church fully obedient to "the law." Smaller? At what cost?

In the late 1990s, the Austrian bishops -- and perhaps some German bishops -- were actually training women for the diaconate. When the "Notification" landed at their episcopal doorsteps, they acquiesced, sending the women away. Wonder what happened?

Ever hear of Roman Catholic Womenpriests? The Danube Seven? A year after the "Notification," these natives of Austria and Germany were off on a riverboat being ordained as priests by an illegal bishop in an illegal ceremony. By 2003, they were excommunicated -- for breaking the law.

The point? They were interested in ministry, they were interested in evangelization, they were interested in Scripture. Now the women are forming their own church-within-a-church, with moderate success in Europe and the United States. Along the way, they are siphoning off some very talented women (and men) who want what the Pfarrer Initiative asks for: ordained married men and women to spread the Gospel.

Here's the bottom line: Whoever helps the frail papal hand prepare and sign documents about women and married men in ministry is clearly and painfully against any intrusion of women into the halls of power (read: law) and is bent on ignoring the call to Gospel service for all (read: Scripture).

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